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Shattering the Stereotypes: An Interview with Fawzia Afzal-Khan

by Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal

Fawzia Afzal-Khan teaches at Montclair University and is a poet, a playwright, a singer and an actor. She draws on both her academic tenure in the US and her insider's experience of alternative street theatre groups in Pakistan to develop her critical insight for the secular theatre there. Her book, *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan*, has been well received. "Fawzia Afzal-Khan," in Richard Schechner's words, "is that rare person who is as fine a thinker as she is an artist and an activist. ...her book is a triumph of scholarship—and an exciting, up-close account of what it's like to do radical street theatre in today's Pakistan" (*A Critical Stage*, backflap). Her argument in that book concerns women's and minorities' rights, class and gender issues, language politics, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which are defined and contested in the evolving and often conflictive relationship between the Pakistani State and Pakistani society. Another of her books, *Shattering The Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, has been admired by several scholars including Bapsi Sidhwa, who calls it "a timely collection that rings with veracity" (backflap). She has also authored *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (Penn State University Press, 1993) and co-edited *The Preoccupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Duke University Press, 2000). Her forthcoming book is a memoir, entitled *Sahelian: Growing Up With Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style* (Syracuse University Press).

Apart from this work, she has been a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard, an ACLS Fellow, an American Institute of Pakistani Studies Fellow, Rotary Fellow, and a Writers Residency Fellow at Lavigny, Switzerland. She has also been a HEC Fellow (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan) to Government College University Lahore. She is on the executive boards of AMA (American Muslim alliance), PANA (Pakistani-American National Alliance) and PADF (Pakistani American Democratic Forum). The reputed journals like TDR (The Drama Review) and SAR (South Asian Review) have honoured her by including her name in their Boards. She is also the winner of an award at Greenburgh Annual Poetry Competition, NY. Her literary creations can be found in journals like NWSA Journal, Counterpunch

and TDR. In a detailed conversation, Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal interviews this unorthodox intellectual on several issues related to theatre, feminism and literary theory.

NKA: The Postcolonial scholars give a lot of attention to the concepts of hybridity, multiplicity and composite culture. Salman Rushdie, in his celebrated book *Imaginary Homelands*, talks about these concepts as thus: “Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it.... Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings. Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another...” (394). Will you describe the secular alternative theatre in Pakistan in line with the aforesaid argument of Rushdie? Make a statement on secular alternative theatre in Pakistan with reference to Rushdie’s just-mentioned comments about hybridity, multiplicity and composite culture.

FAK: Well, I think the secular alternative theatre in Pakistan, as I have discussed and analyzed it in my recent book, *A Critical Stage*, is very much about a challenge to orthodoxies that I believe Rushdie is talking about here. Many of the productions and street plays I discuss by groups like Ajoka, Lok Rehas, Tehrik-i-Niswan and others, are performances which want to make their audiences uncomfortable in the Brechtian sense—that is, make folks question their pieties and received or conventional ways of seeing and treating the “other” within. This “otherization” includes the second-class treatment accorded to women and to religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan by a society where the state and the mullahs of late have tried to claim a rhetoric of “purity” for the country on the basis of Islam.

NKA: What is the reaction of the orthodox people to this type of new venture in Pakistan?

FAK: Obviously, many people do not care for this type of work, and try and make fun of or belittle the importance of these groups; including calling some of them Ajoka in particular because of its many performances touring India—spies for foreign governments!

NKA: How is this parallel theatre successful in molding the sensibility of the people in Pakistan?

FKA: Oh, I think this parallel theatre is definitely successful in raising the level of awareness in the audiences about difficult but important issues affecting different sectors of the Pakistani populace. For urban middle and upper middle class audi-

ences, many are made aware for the first time about the level of injustice and oppression that their less-fortunate rural and lower-class sisters and brothers suffer. E.g., in plays like Ajoka's *Dhee Rani*, *Barri* and *Kaala Meinda Bhes*, and Tehrik-i-Niswan's *Aurat*, and Lok Rehas' *Saar*—audiences are made aware of the plight of women, and specifically, women who are illiterate and/or poor and from the villages and have little recourse to accessing their rights as human beings—as *Kaal Meinda Bhes* points out—they are ranked even lower than the buffaloes for which they are often traded—especially when the buffalo is healthy and can provide a family with milk to sell and drink!

When the audiences are themselves from rural or low-income urban areas, they are often shocked into recognizing and then possibly questioning their own adherence to unjust systems of living. In the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques championed by the former Punjab Lok Rehas—now practiced by their offshoot, Interactive Resource Center (IRC)—different communities in far-flung areas of Pakistan are encouraged to form their own theatre groups in order to role-play their problems and issues and, in so doing, find possible solutions for them.

NKA: In this advanced age of Information Technology, do people still visit the theatre? Don't you think the ancient art of theatre is dying a slow death due to the onslaught of Internet and TV channels?

FAK: Surprisingly, people still like going to see live theatre in Pakistan, since it is a rare occasion to “go out” and many theatrical venues really try to keep their ticket prices affordable for people of varying classes. Many of the “parallel” theatre groups, of course, provide “free” theatre to different audiences in lower-income areas, because their work is underwritten by NGOs who want certain issues to be highlighted. This also leads to charges of these theatre groups being lackeys or mouthpieces of foreign powers/the west being lobbied against them!

NKA: Did you face any difficulty in finding a proper publisher for your book *Shattering the Stereotypes*, due to its unorthodox subject?

FAK: As a matter of fact, yes! The Feminist Press had initially expressed interest in seeing the manuscript. But when they read, I think, Nawal el Saadawi's rather strong-worded condemnation of the U.S. and of President Bush, they withdrew their interest. One of my original contributors also withdrew her essay for that reason.

NKA: What will you say about the author-publisher relationship? Sometimes, the mutual understanding between the two can be missing. Whom do you prefer more:

the sub-continental publishers or their counterparts from the West? Please make an argument.

FAK: Yes, this is a difficult relationship. I find that the most problematic aspect—and this holds true for both US-based and subcontinental publishers—is the issue of promotion and marketing. Both sets of publishers—especially since one is dealing with academic publishers whose budgets are necessarily small—are quite useless in this regard. Another difficulty is the issue of readers' reports. Academic publishers require two solid reviews recommending publication before they will commit to taking the manuscript—and the problem here is that the reviewers, being busy themselves in their own projects, are often very tardy in their responses. So, a book can just sit on the publishers' desk for a very long time.

NKA: What makes the Muslim women speak out? What do you think is the source of their creative inspiration? Is it their age-old repression by conventional male society?

FAK: At this moment in history, I believe it is a combination of this male prejudice from within their societies certainly, against which Muslim women creatively militate—but also, western ignorance and prejudice against Islam in general and Muslim women in particular, which has gotten their creative juices flowing in protest!

NKA: Did the males receive the book favourably? What was their general opinion about the book? Did you find some positive reviews of the book by Muslim men too?

FAK: Actually, now that you mention it, I realized the only reviews—and most have been favorable—have been by women! Wow!

NKA: What are the major themes of your poems and plays?

FAK: I have a lot of poems about mothers and daughters—their often difficult relationship in which so many different emotional and psychological issues get highlighted. I also tend to write about the relationship of politics to the personal issues of a woman's life—including this construct called "romantic love." Some of my poems and plays—I have written two plays, and published a lot of poems—also deal with crises of spirituality and its fraught relationship to organized religion and a world of patriarchy and war.

NKA: What are the major influences on you as a writer?

FAK: Many feminist writers and Postcolonial theorists, both male and female, whose work I became exposed to and enamored of during my PhD program and later as a scholar and academic, have influenced me and my writing style, as well as

the work of several poets, all from different parts of the world; also, my background as a Pakistani woman of Muslim origin having spent my formative years growing up in Lahore and also in parts of Africa have left their mark on my psyche and hence on my writing. Ernest Hemingway, Kate Chopin, Milan Kundera, Edward Said, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sara Suleri, Bapsi Sidhwa, Evan Boland, Meena Alexander, Kishwar Naheed, Leila Ahmed, Nawal el Saadawi, Helene Cixous, Gayatri Spivak and many others have all been inspirational writers and thinkers for me.

NKA: Why did you choose English for your literary works over your native language?

FAK: Well, I grew up attending an English-medium school in Lahore, and of course, speaking English at home as was the norm in most middle-class educated families of Pakistan at that time. We were all very much products of a colonial heritage, even though we were growing up in a postcolonial state, and so English became our lingua franca. While I also spoke Urdu and a smattering of Punjabi at home, nevertheless, it was the English language that I felt most at ease with and whose literature I read most voraciously--Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie were my favorite childhood and adolescent writers! So, it is only natural that I would feel most at home writing in English--though I love to use phrases from Urdu and Punjabi and other languages I have picked up over the years like French and Spanish in some of my writing.

NKA: Being a member of the Asian diasporic community in USA, did you feel some sort of alienation/marginalization in your writing/academic career? Please explicate.

FAK: It is a widely-held belief that America is a multicultural melting pot, and while there is some truth to it, the fact is that as an immigrant one does feel a sense of both belonging and exclusion to the American culture as well as to one's native land. I am a naturally friendly and outgoing person, and very curious about and also at home with different peoples, classes, and cultures. So I have had a relatively easy time assimilating into a dominant American cultural mold. However, I do feel alienated from what passes as the "norm" of behavior and the rituals of belonging which every community clings to--and so I don't feel entirely at home anywhere--either in my adopted land of the USA, or the country of my birth, Pakistan. That is okay with me, as I feel that some degree of "outsiderness" is necessary to be able to observe and critique mores and ideas which most people accept too readily and unreflectively in their desire to "fit in." Of course, I have faced some hurdles in my career as an academic, which I think have to do more with my political opinions than with anything else. As a fervent defender of Palestinian rights, I have faced

discrimination from colleagues in positions of power at my work-place, where I have been denied certain awards and honors, and even promotions due to their prejudice against my openly-stated beliefs. However, there are enough institutional safeguards that eventually one gets one's due--and I am a fighter! As far as my writing and publication career, I haven't faced too many problems--though I know I can't get any serious critical essays on Zionism to be published in the New York Times! But thank God there are alternative outlets--like *Counterpunch*, which regularly publishes my political writings. And when the feminist press turned down my edited volume on Muslim women's writings post 9/11, because, I suspect, of Nawal el Saadawi's strongly anti-US imperialist and anti-Bush preface, there was luckily *Interlink Books*--which specializes in books on the Muslim and Arab world--that took on the book and published it to much critical acclaim.

So, yes, there are always people and institutions trying to exclude you, but you have to keep up the struggle. And I think that happens everywhere, especially for those of us who seek to speak truth to power.

NKA: You are a literary critic, playwright and singer trained in the North Indian classical tradition. What about writing a novel?

FAK: I would like to---but it would require a lot more time than I have at the moment with so many different responsibilities and a full-time teaching career. I have completed a memoir, however, called *Sahelian: Growing Up With Girlfriends Pakistani-Style*—which is under consideration with Syracuse University Press, and which will hopefully also be published by Women Unlimited Press of India. I am keeping my fingers crossed! A recent memoir story from it was published in a collection of Pakistani women writers' work, in an anthology called *And The World Changed*, edited by Muneeza Shamsie and published by Oxford University Press and recently by the Feminist Press.

NKA: What prompted you to go for the Indian classical tradition of Music?

FAK: Well, when I was a young girl growing up in Pakistan, I somehow fell in love with the difficulty and intricacy of our classical tradition in music, and my first ustad, Abdul Haq Qureshi of the Kirana Ghirana, encouraged me in this passion and proved to be a sterling teacher. I went on to compete in—and win—many all-Pakistan Classical Music competitions and now am so happy to have had this training, since I can easily perform with musicians from different traditions, especially jazz. I have a band here in NY called the Neither East Nor West Ensemble and I love performing with them! Now the REAL reason I went in for classical training was rebellion---my mother thought if I could learn to sing some pretty film songs or light ghazals, I would attract some good marriage proposals...so instead, I went

in for obscure, challenging classical music which few people could appreciate in Pakistan since they lacked the training and sophistication required to appreciate this type of music. I thought this way I would be safe from unwanted proposals!!! And I was right!!! Ha ha!!!

NKA: As an outsider (you are a professor of English at Montclair University), how do you find the condition of English studies in the sub-continent? What will you say about the curriculum of English studies in the universities of the sub-continent? Does it not require a complete overhaul? Should we not include more regional literature in English translation in place of the colonial texts of England? Will it give a national character to English studies in the sub-continent? Please share your views.

FAK: I agree with your views on the fairly pathetic condition of English Studies in our part of the world---I can only speak with some authority on the situation prevalent in Pakistan, where I have had both the privilege and the frustration of teaching at the MA and MPhil level in recent years at two premier institutes of higher education in Lahore: Government College University and Forman Christian College. I have also given lectures over the years at my alma mater, Kinnaird College of Women (also in Lahore), and taught women's studies courses at the International Women's Studies Institute of Lahore.

In each of these contexts, I discovered that faculty especially are very attached to a very old-fashioned and moribund way of teaching, and also that they are constrained, even in this latter day and age, to teach materials that do not reflect these new literatures in English and translation. However, there is some hope for change. I did start a Postcolonial Studies program for MPhil candidates at GCU, and also taught a course in PS for MA students at FCC last fall. I also argued for the inclusion of Pakistani English writers like Taufiq Rafat, Maki Qureshi, Kaleem Omar, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, and a whole slew of younger generation Pakistani writers writing in English like Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, and others, to be included in the curriculum at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Some places, like the University of the Punjab, do include some poems and other works by these and other writers—albeit sporadically—in their curricula. Recently, I have read and evaluated a PhD thesis written in Pakistan on Pakistani English poet Alamgir Hashmi's work. So, this means people are beginning to pay attention to the need to turn attention to “native” work, in addition to the usual “canon.” One can only hope this trend will continue and intensify in the coming years.

NKA: How is the sub-continental literature received in the west?

FAK: Ever since the ascent of Rushdie in the West, subcontinental literature in English has received a big boost here. Now, the younger generation of South Asian

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novelists and poets gets much acclaim here—and I have colleagues who love the ghazal form and even attempt to write ghazals in English! Many teach Rushdie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Anita Desai, Monica Ali and others in their courses. There are also many professors who are developing and teaching courses in South Asian Literatures in universities across the USA.

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